



Joining the Partnership for a Lead Free Future

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Summary

This Labour government is rightly taking a different approach to international development, leading a shift towards multilateral partnerships for mutual benefit.

As part of this shift, Britain should join the [Partnership for a Lead Free Future](#) (PLFF), to accelerate good growth abroad, champion women and girls and promote global health, through dignified international collaboration.

Lead poisoning [costs](#) the global economy £1 *trillion* each year (far more than is spent globally on aid), is [associated](#) with menstrual disorders and infertility in women, and [causes](#) 1.6 million deaths each year (more than HIV/AIDS and malaria) from cardiovascular disease alone.

The PLFF is a global coalition leading the battle against lead poisoning, with partners from the Global South including Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi.

With [no compulsory](#) legal or financial obligations involved, joining the PLFF would align British foreign policy with the USA, Norway and Canada, and demonstrate that we remain a reliable partner to nations in the Global South, even in an era of constrained aid budgets.

As a PLFF partner, Britain should:

1. Advocate for [listing lead chromate](#) as a toxic chemical at the Rotterdam Convention.
2. Offer [technical assistance](#) for lead elimination through the UK Health Security Agency.
3. Turn London into a “[sentinel city](#)” to identify global sources of lead poisoning.
4. Test for lead exposure at [British embassies](#).
5. Secure public [lead-free commitments](#) from multinational firms headquartered in Britain.

The Problem

Lead Exposure Holds Back Economic Growth

Lead exposure [costs](#) the global economy £1 trillion each year – four times [more](#) than total aid spending by OECD nations in 2024.

[815 million](#) children worldwide have lead poisoning. Lead damages their brains, affecting neurotransmitter release and synapse formation, and explains a [fifth](#) of the learning gap between the Global South and the Global North.

These effects of lead on children's learning translates to [reduced](#) lifetime wages for individuals, and [reduced](#) tax revenue for governments.

Women and Girls Face the Brunt of Lead Exposure

Lead exposure exerts a disproportionate effect on women and girls through its [association](#) with menstrual disorders, infertility and stillbirth.

Aggression and criminal behaviour are [linked](#) to lead poisoning. The Working Group on Understanding and Mitigating the Global Burden of Lead Poisoning has [noted](#) that this may have “major implications” for intimate partner and domestic violence.

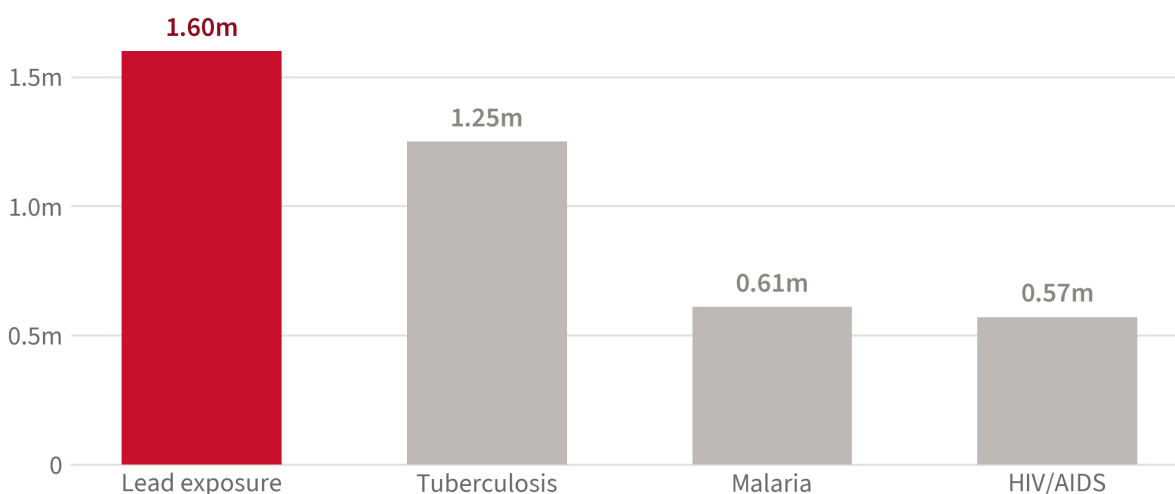
Lead is [present](#) at high concentrations in traditional eye cosmetics such as *surma* (in Pakistan) and *kohl* (in Morocco, a partner of the PLFF), posing a risk to women and girls in particular.

Lead Poisoning is a Global Health Emergency

Lead exposure causes [1.6 million](#) deaths globally each year via its effects on cardiovascular disease, [exceeding](#) deaths from HIV/AIDS and malaria.

Lead kills more people each year than malaria and HIV/AIDS combined

Estimated annual global deaths



Lead: IHME Global Burden of Disease 2021, cardiovascular deaths attributable to lead exposure. Tuberculosis: WHO Global Tuberculosis Report 2024. Malaria: WHO World Malaria Report 2025 (2024 data). HIV/AIDS: UNAIDS fact sheet 2026 (2025 data).

Lead exposure also [causes](#) kidney disease, and researchers are investigating [links](#) to antimicrobial resistance, a major global health challenge in itself.

Experts [believe](#) that there is no safe level of lead exposure.

The Solution

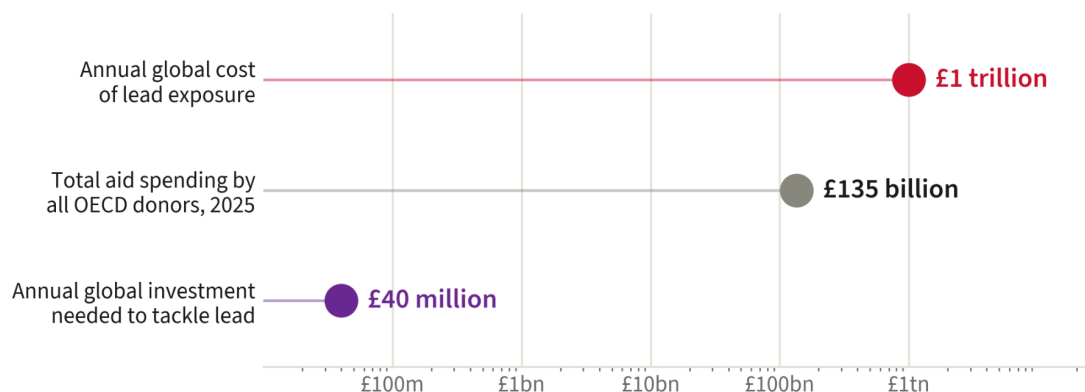
Lead Exposure is Solvable, at Minimal Cost

Lead exposure is solvable. The global [transition](#) from leaded to unleaded petrol, and the [progress](#) in eliminating lead-contaminated turmeric in Bangladesh shows what can be achieved through the actions of national governments working together with international partners.

Compared to many global health challenges, lead exposure could be solved with relatively little spending. The Working Group on Understanding and Mitigating the Global Burden of Lead Poisoning [estimates](#) that a total of only £40 million a year of global investment would be transformative.

A trillion-pound problem with a £40 million price tag

Log scale, so each gridline is ten times the last. Converted at £1 = \$1.29



The cost of the problem is roughly 25,000 times the cost of the fix.

Cost of lead exposure: Larsen & Sánchez-Triana (2023), Lancet Planetary Health; World Bank. Aid spending: OECD preliminary 2025 ODA data, April 2026 (\$174.3bn). Investment needed: Center for Global Development Working Group on the Global Burden of Lead Poisoning (2023).

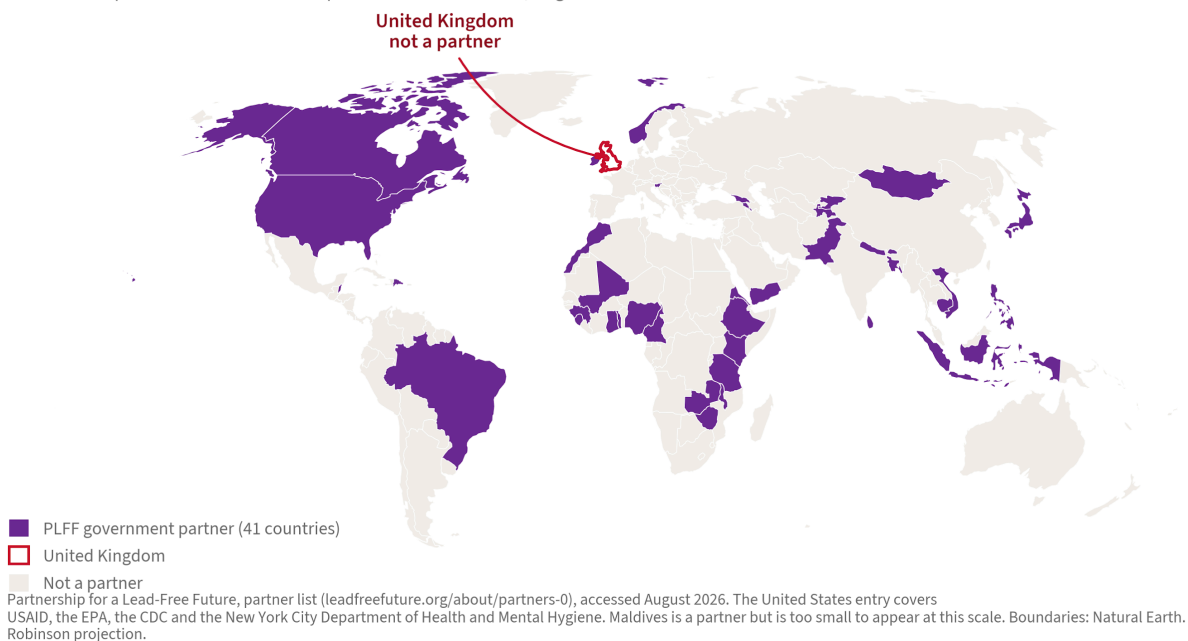
The Partnership for a Lead Free Future

The Partnership for a Lead Free Future (PLFF) launched in 2024 as the first-ever global, public-private partnership dedicated to tackling lead exposure in low- and middle-income countries, with the aim to end childhood lead poisoning by 2040.

The global coalition currently [includes](#) 41 nations, including Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi.

Forty-one governments have already joined. Britain has not.

Government partners of the Partnership for a Lead-Free Future, August 2026



Multilateralism

The PLFF is a UN-led initiative, with its secretariat housed at UNICEF. Joining the PLFF would demonstrate Labour's commitment to [keeping alive](#) the principles of multilateralism.

Partnership, not Paternalism

The PLFF has a [Partnership Strategy](#) focused on enhancing intergovernmental coordination, sharing insights and resources and raising awareness of lead poisoning. The strategy explicitly rejects global governance or global funding mechanisms, focusing instead on true partnerships between nations.

The PLFF secretariat is currently working with partners on a governance structure. By joining at an early stage, Britain can help steer this governance structure towards genuine partnership, where nations of the Global South hold true power, and work with nations from the Global North as equal partners.

Local Provision, not International Intervention

Rather than concentrating power amongst donors, the PLFF focuses on getting behind countries' own priorities and plans. The [foundation](#) of the PLFF's theory of change is: *"governments are fully on-board on the issue of lead poisoning and have agreed institutional mandates and established multisectoral coordination mechanisms"*.

Instead of risking aid dependency by bypassing governments and offering services in parallel, the PLFF [supports](#) governments to pass and enforce their own regulations to contain lead exposure.

Leverage Private Investment

The PLFF [Partnership Strategy](#) includes plans to “build bridges for impact”, partnering with industries and philanthropies.

Existing [partners](#) in the private sector include the [Children’s Investment Fund Foundation \(CIFF\)](#) (headquartered in London) and [Renaissance Philanthropy](#) (which has a UK entity registered in London).

The PLFF [recognises](#) a key role for businesses to stop the use of lead in consumer products, ensure safe stewardship of lead in industrial applications and in supply chains, comply with local laws and regulations and share information and expertise on lead.

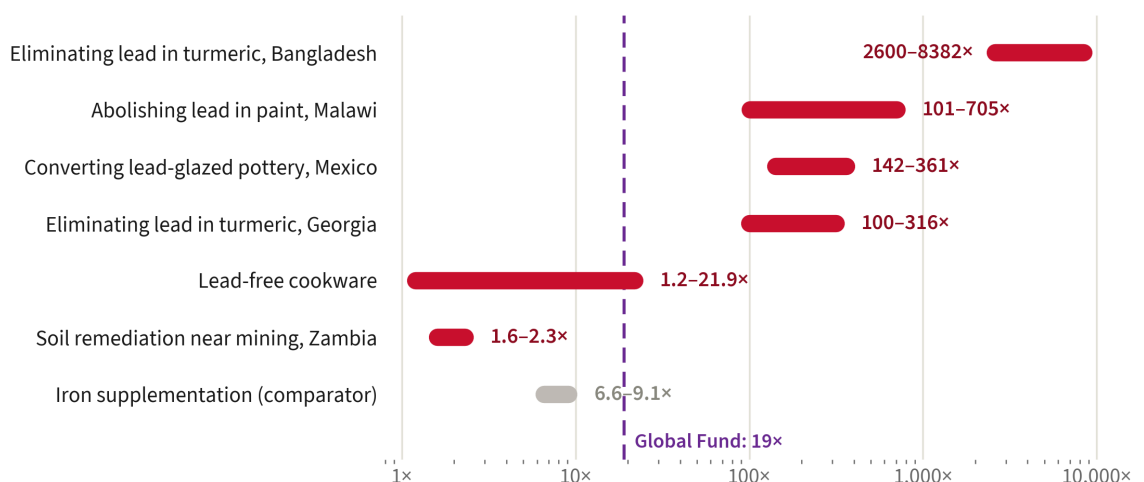
By joining the PLFF, Britain could raise the profile of lead exposure and work with UK-based multinational firms (such as [Unilever](#) and [Lush Cosmetics](#)) and philanthropies (such as [Wellcome](#)) to build new partnerships, leveraging more private investment.

Deliver Value for Money

Lead elimination ranks among the most cost-effective global health interventions.

Lead interventions return 100 to 700 times their cost, and sometimes far more

Benefit-cost ratio: economic benefit generated per £1 spent. Log scale.



World Bank, 'Massive Returns: Economic Efficiency of Interventions to Prevent and Reduce Lead Pollution' (October 2025), drawing on World Bank 2020, 2023 and 2024 studies and Yamada et al. (2023). Global Fund figure: Global Fund Results Report 2024. Ranges are modelled rather than measured.

The World Bank has found that interventions to eliminate lead exposure offer

"massive returns", with up to [\\$8382 returned per \\$1 invested](#). This return on

investment **exceeds** that of the Global Fund ([\\$19 per \\$1 invested](#)), which is already a

[key priority](#) for the FCDO.

Britain's Potential Role in the Battle Against Lead

List Lead Chromate at the Rotterdam Convention

The [Rotterdam Convention](#) is an international treaty governing the trade of hazardous chemicals. It has secured ratification from over 160 countries, and ensures developing nations receive critical safety information before importing hazardous substances.

PLFF partners Cameroon and Morocco have [called](#) on the Rotterdam Convention to add lead chromates (a key source of lead exposure in paint) to its *List of Toxic Chemicals Requiring Advance Notice for Exports*.

Once Britain becomes a PLFF partner, the FCDO should support Cameroon and Morocco's call. Going forward, the FCDO should work towards a vote at the next *meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Rotterdam Convention*, and co-ordinate with PLFF partners to vote in favour of adding lead chromate to the *List of Toxic Chemicals Requiring Advance Notice for Exports*.

Expand UKHSA Technical Assistance

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) has already provided [technical assistance](#) to support lead elimination in Georgia, a PLFF partner.

By testing blood samples, testing environmental sources and conducting surveys to understand children's behaviour, UKHSA helped identify spices, tea, and paint as [key sources](#) of lead exposure.

This case study demonstrates that Britain possesses valuable technical expertise which could support PLFF partner nations with source identification.

The FCDO and DHSC should work together to expand this model to other PLFF partners, establishing long-term partnerships between UKHSA and domestic public health agencies to eliminate lead exposure.

Turn London into a “Sentinel City” for Lead Exposure

Georgia’s actions on lead poisoning were influenced by public health professionals in New York, who [found](#) that residents from the Georgian diaspora were more likely to experience lead poisoning, due to the consumption of spices purchased in Georgia.

New York [combines](#) screening for lead poisoning with thorough investigations into sources of exposure. Amongst immigrant and diaspora populations, exposure sources often originate abroad. By [sharing information](#) on sources of lead exposure, New York acts as a “[sentinel city](#)”, supporting international partners to identify and tackle sources of lead exposure locally.

London, with its significant immigrant and diaspora population, should replicate New York’s model. This would enable us to protect the health of British children at home while strengthening public health systems abroad – a true example of partnership for mutual benefit. The DHSC and FCDO should share data with the PLFF, and co-ordinate with New York to form a [wider network](#) of “sentinel cities” committed to ending lead poisoning.

Test for Lead at British Embassies

At British embassies in high-risk countries, the FCDO should mandate testing of [potential](#) environmental sources of lead (such as drinking water, paints, aluminum and ceramic cookware, spices, cosmetics, medicines and toys) to protect diplomatic staff and their families. Blood lead testing should also be offered to enable the identification and treatment of British citizens with lead poisoning.

Relevant data should then be shared with local public health agencies to support national efforts towards lead elimination.

Secure Lead-Testing Commitments From British Firms

By securing Lead-Testing commitments from UK-headquartered firms, the government can advance its development goals at minimal public cost.

Unilever reaches [3.4 billion consumers daily, including](#) in PLFF partners Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Ethiopia, Uganda and Ghana, while Lush Cosmetics operates over [880 stores across 52 countries](#), including PLFF partners Philippines and Vietnam.

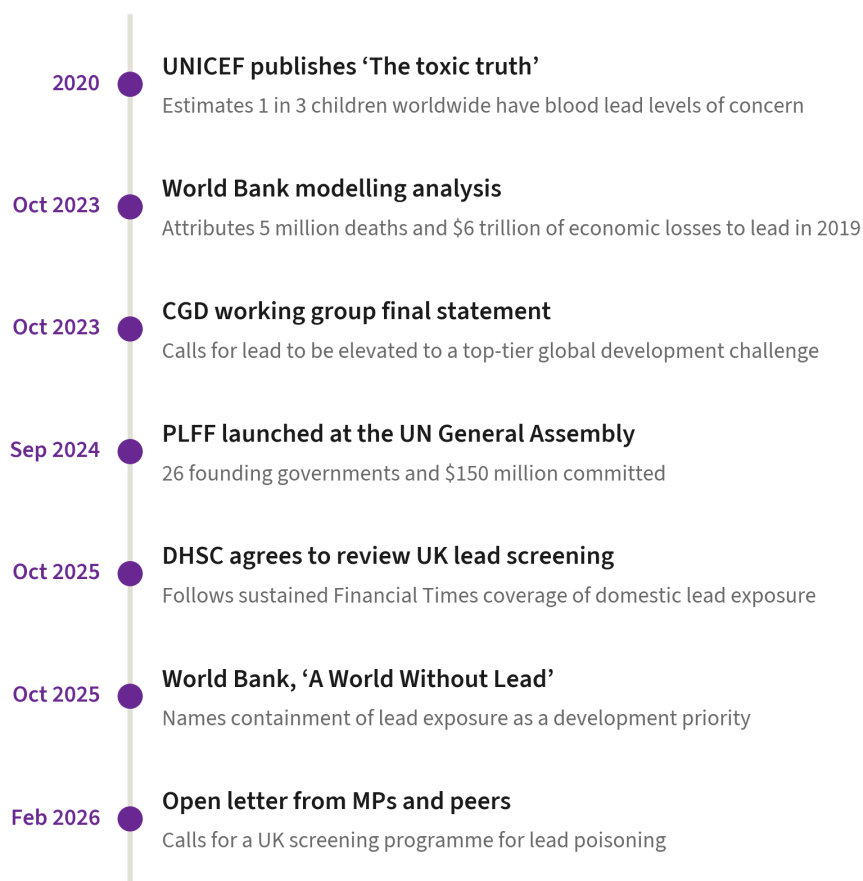
The FCDO should work with Unilever and Lush Cosmetics to secure high-profile commitments to test for and reduce lead contamination in their products worldwide. While directly containing potential sources of lead exposure, this could drive broader change in associated industries by encouraging international competitors to follow suit.

Why Now?

Over the last six years, emerging research has helped establish broad consensus on lead elimination being an international development priority.

Six years of evidence have made lead a development priority

Key moments in the global response to lead poisoning



In 2020, UNICEF published “[The toxic truth: Children’s exposure to lead pollution undermines a generation of future potential](#)”, estimating that 1 in 3 children globally suffer from lead poisoning.

In October 2023, researchers at the World Bank published a [modelling analysis](#), estimating that in 2019, lead exposure caused 5 million deaths from cardiovascular disease and \$6 trillion of economic losses.

In the same month, the [Center for Global Development](#)'s *Working Group on Understanding and Mitigating the Global Burden of Lead Poisoning* published its [final statement](#), arguing that "lead poisoning should be elevated as a top-tier global development challenge".

In September 2024, the PLFF was officially [launched](#) during the UN General Assembly high-level week.

In October 2025, DHSC finally [agreed](#) to review whether screening should begin for lead poisoning in the UK, after significant coverage of domestic lead exposure by the Financial Times. The same month, the World Bank released a [report](#) titled "*A World Without Lead: Paving the Path to a Healthy, Productive Future*", highlighting containment of lead exposure as a development priority.

In February 2026, an open letter from MPs and Peers [called](#) for a screening programme for lead poisoning to be introduced in the UK.

With momentum building domestically and internationally to tackle lead exposure, now is the right time for Britain to join the PLFF. In an era of constrained budgets, the PLFF offers Britain an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate its ongoing leadership in international development.